

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 4502

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AMCONSUL STUTTGART NIACT IMMEDIATE

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 6684

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS PGOV LE

SUBJECT: POLITICAL SITUATION IN LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 6668 AND 6670 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: THREE-DAY OLD LEBANESE GOVT HEADED BY NUREDDIN

RIFAI HAS RESIGNED AS RESULT OF COMBINED SYRIAN

PRESSURE AND WIDESPREAD DOMESTIC POLITICAL OPPOSITION.

PRES FRANGIE, HOWEVER, HAS ASKED RIFAI AND HIS MINISTERS

TO REMAIN IN OFFICE AS CARETAKERS UNTIL SUCCESSOR

CABINET IS APPOINTED. SINCE ANY DELAY IN INSTALLATION

OF NEW GOVT WILL ONLY INTENSIFY TURMOIL AND

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WHICH LEBANON HAS EXPERIENCED OVER PAST FIVE DAYS, WE EXPECT FRANGIE WILL PROBABLY ACQUIESCE IN SPEEDY APPOINTMENT OF NEW, LARGELY CIVILIAN CABINET MANNED ALONG "TRADITIONAL" LEBANESE POLITICAL LINES. END SUMMARY.

1. PRIMIN NUREDDIN RIFAI ANNOUNCED AT 1300 HOURS LOCAL THAT HIS CABINET WAS EN ROUTE TO RESIGNATION. SUBSEQUENTLY, FOLLOWING HIS MEETING WITH PRES FRANGIE AT PRRESIDENTIAL PALACE, RADIO LIBAN AT 1400 LOCAL CARRIED OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT OF RIFAI'S RESIGNATION, TOGETHER WITH NEWS THAT FRANGIE HAD ACKNOWLEDGED IT AND HAD REQUESTED RIFAI AND HIS MINISTERS TO REMAIN AS CARETAKER CABINET UNTIL SUCCESSOR GOVT HAD BEEN FORMED. RIFAI, AT CABINET MEETING EARLIER THIS MORNINH, HAD INFORMED HIS MINISTERS OF HIS INTENTION TO RESIGN NOW THAT AGREEMENT ON ANOTHER CEASEFIRE (THE FIFTH IN AS MANY DAYS) WAS ARRANGED LATE LAST NIGHT BETWEEN PHALANGISTS, FEDAYEEN REPS AND GOL SECURITY OFFICIALS THROUGH "GOOD OFFICES" OF SYRIAN FONMIN KHADDAM (BEIRUT 6678).

2. WHAT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS WILL ENSRRE FROM RIFAI GOVT'S RESIGNATION ARE NOT ENTIRELY CLEAR. MOST INFORMED OBSERVERS EXPECT THAT PRES FRANGIE--BOWING TO POWERFUL INTERNAL OPPOSITION TO MILITARY GOVT'S CONTINUANCE IN OFFICE (REFTEL) AND TO WHAT WE UNDERSTAND HAS BEEN INTENSE SYRIAN PRESSURE EXERTED ON HIM IN SAME DIRECTION BY KHADDAM IN PAST 24 HOURS -- WILL QUICKLY TURN TO TRIPOLI STRONGMAN RASHID KARAME TO FORM NEW CABINET. THERE IS ALSO POSSIBILITY, HOWEVER, THAT FRANGIE WILL CONTINUE TO BALK AT ACCEPTING KARAME.

LATTER APPARENTLY STILL INSISTS ON HAVING RELATIVELY FREE HAND AT FORMING CABINET, AND HE REPORTEDLY HAS GIVEN FRANGIE ONLY A VAGUE IDEA OF HOW HE INTENDS TO RESTORE PUBLIC ORDER AND PLACE LEBANESE-PALESTINAIN RELATIONS ON MORE STABLE FTOTING. (WE SUSPECT KARAME CONFIDENTIAL

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MAY HAVE NO REAL PLAN FOR ACHIEVING LATTER AND INTENDS TO RELY ON HIS SKILL AS EXPERT POLITICAL MANEUVERER TO PUT TOGETHER SOME KIND OF CABINET TEAM THAT WOULD TEMPORARILY SATISFY VARIOUS CONTENDING PARTIES AND PROVIDE CALMER ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH GOL-PALESTINIAN DISCUSSION RE NEW MODUS VIVENDI COULD GO FORWARD.) IF FRANGIE REFUSES TO ACCEPT KARAME'S CANDIDACY, SOME COMPROMISE CANDIDATE (LOCAL RUMOR-MILL NOW FINGERS

SAEB SALIM AS PRIME CONTEODER) MIGHT BE SELECTED TO FORM CABINET IN HIS PLACE.

3. YET ANOTHER POSSIBILITY, WHICH WE THINKK IS LESS LIKELY BUT WHICH OUGHT NOT TO BE RULED OUT IN VIEW OF FRANGIE'S WELL-KNOWN STUBBORNESS, IS THAT HE MIGHT REFUSE TO SUCCUMB COMPLETELY TO DTMESTIC AND SYRIAN PRESSURES AND SIMPLY DRAG HIS FEET IN REPLACING OUTGOING CARETAKER CABINET WHITH ANY NEW TEAM AT ALL. (AS DEPT PROBABLY AWARE, LEBANESE CONSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE IS FOR RESIGNED CABINETS TO REMAIN OFFICE AS CARETAKERS UNTIL PRO-MULGATION OF FUTURE PRESIDENTIAL DECREE ANNOUNCING APPOINTMENT OF SUCCESSOR CABINET.) THIS DEVICE WOULD PROBABLY NOT SATISFY SYRIANS, AND IT WOULD CERTAINLY OUTRAGE NOT SATISFY SYRIANS, AND IT WOULD CERTAINLY OUTRAGE DOMESTIC OPPONENTS OF RIFAI GOVT AS BEING TRICK AIMED AT SHORT-CIRCUING THEIR INSISTENCE THAT CURRENT ACUTE PROBLEMS FACING GOL CONTINUE TO BE HANDLED THROUGH NORMAL LEBANESE POLITICAL PROCESS, RATHER THAN THROUGH WHAT THEY REGARD AS "UNCONSITUTIONAL" RESORT TO MILITARYT RULE. (WHAT THIS REALLY BOILS DOWN TO IS THEIR DETERMINATION TO FORCE PRES FRANGIE TO SHARE HIS TREATMENT OF URGENT NATIONAL ISSUES WITH LEBANON'S "TRADITIONAL" CIVILIAN POLITICIANS, INSTEAD OF BY-PASSING THEM AS HE HAS LATELY BEEN TRYING TO DO.) KEEPING RIFAI AND HIS MINISTERS IN OFFICE AS CARETAKERS FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME WOULD THUS BE LIKELY TO INTENSIFY AGITATION ALREADY BEING CARRIED ON AGAINST RIFAI GOVT BY ITS MANY LOCAL OPPONENTS. WE NOTE THAT ANNOUNCEMENTS OF FRANGIE'S REQUEST FOR MILITARY GOVT TO REMAIN AS CARETAKERS COINCIDED WITH RENEWED CONFIDENTIAL

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OUTBREAK OF HEAVY FIRING AT APPROX 1430 LOCAL IN MANY PARTS OF BEIRUT.

4. ASSUMING EARLY FORMATION OF NEW CIVILIAN CABINET ALONG LINES SET FORTH PARA 1 ABOVE, NEXT STEP WOULD PROBABLY BE HOLDING OF LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN "SUMMIT" CONFERENCE TO WORK OUT ELEMENTS OF MORE STABLE GOL-FEDAYEEN RELATIONSHIP. WE NOTICE LAST NIGHT'S PLO (WAFAP)NEWS BULLETIN STRESSED LIKELIHOOD OF SUCH A DEVELOPMENT, GIVING CLEAR INDICATION THAT SYRIANS--IN PERSON OF FONMIN KHADDAM--WOULD BE EXPECTED TO PLAY CLEAR ROLE IN ARRANGING "SOLUTION SATISFACTORY TO ALL CONCERNED". AT SAME TIME, PFLP/GC CHIEFTAIN AHMED GIBRIL, FOLLOWING MEETING BETWEEN FEDAYEEN REPS AND GOL SECURITY OFFICIALS PRESIDED OVER BY

KHADDAM TO WORK OUT LAST NIGHT'S CEASEFIRE, MADE PUBLIC STATEMENT TO EFFECT THAT FEDAYEEN ALLIANCE WITH LEBANESE "NATIONALIST, PROGRESSIVE FORCES" HAS BECOME SO WELL-KNIT AND "UNSHAKABLE" THAT IT WILL HENCEFORTH BE IMPREGNABLE TO ATTACKS BY GOLPN "REACTIONARY" LEBANESE ELEMENTS AND THEIR "IMPERIALIST MASTERS". WHAT GIBRIL WAS REALLY DOING WAS TO SERVE RENEWED NOTICE THAT FEDAYEEN INFLUENCE AND PRESENCE IN LEBANON HAVE BECOME FORCES TO BE RECKONED WITH IN LEBANESE INTERNAL POLITICS AND TO WARN THAT FUTURE ATTEMPTS TO IGNORE OR REDUCE THIS FACTOR WILL BRING DISASTER TO THE LEBANESE.

5. COMMENT: SYRIAN OPPOSITION TO RIFAI'S MILITARY GOVT STRIKES US AS RATHER SICK JOKE, BUT THIS OBVIOUSLY DOES NOT INHIBIT SARG FROM USING ITS INFLUENCE TO ASIST DOMESTIC OPPOSITION IN ACHIEVING THEIR PREFERRED SOLUTION OF LEBANON'S CURRENT INTERNAL CRISIS. DOMESTIC OPPONENTS OF RIFAI GOVT SEEM NOT IN THE LEAST DISTURBED BY THIS DIRECT SYRIAN INTERVENTION IN LEBANESE INTERNAL AFFAIRS, EITHER, BEING MOTIVATED BY OVERWHELMING DESIRE TO THWART FRANGIE'S RESORT TO MILITARY GOVT (AND PREVENT THEIR OWN EXCLUSION FROM POWER) AT ANY COST. REMAINS TO BE SEEN, AS NOTED PARA 3
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ABOVE, WHETHER FRANGIE WILL ENDEAVOR TO RESIST THESE COMBINED PRESSURES FOR SPEEDY APPOINTMENT OF NEW CIVILIAN GOVT. GIVEN SEVERE PRESSURES BEING PUT ON HIM AT THIS JUNCTURE AND PROSPECT THAT ANY DELAY IN APPOINTING SUCCESSOR GOVT SEEMS CERTAIN TO PROVOKE FURTHER TURMOIL AND STRIFE HERE, HE WILL PROBABLY ACCEDE TO SUCH PRESSURES.
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